

NEWS

E. 496,930

OCT 15 1965

South Viet 'Indians'

on the Warpath

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Daily News Foreign Service

BUON KO TAM, South Viet Nam — There are "too many Vietnamese here now," the young Rahde tribesman said. "There is not enough room to bury them."

"We like the whiteskins," one of the hamlet elders added, referring to the Americans and other Caucasians.

These were montagnards talking, the semi-primitive people who occupy the central highlands of Viet Nam. Many of the men wear only breechcloths and they are still handier with crude crossbows and poisoned arrows than with guns.

Many of the women go about naked to the waist and it is not too unusual to see one of them suckling a child at one breast and a piglet at the other. They drink fearsome amounts of rice wine, and fresh animal's blood is routinely served on ceremonial occasions.

BUT FOR ALL their primitiveness the montagnards present one of the serious problems involved in bringing peace and political stability to South Viet Nam.

It is a problem somewhat similar to that of the American Indian in the days of the westward expansion and the slaughter of the buffalo. It is also a problem in which the



Montagnard mother and child: To the Vietnamese they are less than second-class citizens.

Americans here find themselves sometimes embarrassingly involved.

This hamlet just outside Ban Me Thuot in Darlac province is home for about 800 men, women and children of the Rahde tribe, probably the most civilized of the more than a dozen montagnard tribes.

Like almost all montagnards the Rahde have no use for the Vietnamese, even

though they are part of the same country.

UNTIL several years ago there were almost no Vietnamese around here. Then President Ngo Dinh Diem, slain in the bloody November, 1963, coup, launched a program to "colonize" the highlands with Vietnamese who would develop farms and plantations in "land development centers."

The montagnards, who have

lived in the region for centuries, considered the Vietnamese intruders and they still do. And the Vietnamese generally have treated the Montagnards as something less than second-class citizens.

The results have been, predictable. Not only does the government have great difficulty in winning the montagnards' loyalty and getting them to participate significantly in the war effort but it also has found itself faced with montagnard rebellions.

An organization called FULRO, standing for, in French, United Front to Liberate the Oppressed Races, staged minor rebellions against the government last year and again a few weeks ago. The government's response was to describe FULRO as Communist-inspired and to crack down hard.

BUT NOT ALL Americans here see it that way. In fact the rebellions brought considerable embarrassment. U.S. Special Forces had had good success in organizing montagnards to fight the Viet Cong only to find some of the same montagnards, armed with American weapons, involved in antigovernment rebellions.

It is known that former Gen. Edwin Lansdale, the sometime Central Intelligence Agency operative and counterinsurgency expert who is now here as special assistant to Ambassador Henry Cabot

Lodge, feels very strongly that montagnards must get a better break from the Vietnamese government.

The second-class treatment now accorded montagnards, Lansdale is reliably reported to feel, allows Communists to gain strength in the central highlands.

PRIME Minister Ky has talked a lot about there being no second-class citizens in Viet Nam—and some new opportunities in military and other jobs have been opened to montagnards.

But the fact remains that the montagnards, a significant ethnic minority estimated to total about 1,000,000 persons in the sparsely populated highlands, are still far from sold on the Vietnamese.

They much prefer Americans, and, despite the crack-down, there is still FULRO talk of an independent republic for the highland montagnards.

THE MONTAGNARDS are darker skinned than the Vietnamese and they have many winning characteristics. They are not particularly industrious, but they have a strong sense of family and they can almost kill you with kindness and hospitality if they count you a friend.

Here in Buon Ko Tam, for

example, we and the two American Army officers escorting us were ushered with great ceremony into the house occupied by the hamlet elder, his son and his grandson and their families along with assorted other relatives.

The house was built of thatch and bamboo, elevated on stilts, and more than 200 feet long.

Inside the air was thick with smoke from a dozen small cooking fires, the walls were lined with benches and huge crocks of rice wine, and at one end of the communal living room hung a massive cask-shaped ceremonial drum. From

the ceiling hung a collection of spears and crossbows.

PROMPTLY at 9 a.m. everyone dropped everything and uncovered a crock of wine. Each of the guests and all the important tribesmen present had to take several turns sucking the wine through a long curved reed jammed into the crock.

Then there was a meal of rice, sweet corn, squash, tea and a plum-like fruit. They would be greatly offended if their friends did not eat and drink with them.

"We are not like the Vietnamese," one man said. "With Vietnamese you must pay for

everything—Rahde give everything."

MANY Americans also think the montagnards often make better soldiers than the Vietnamese.

"It takes only one company of Rahde to rescue a whole battalion of Vietnamese" when it's getting clobbered by the Viet Cong, a U.S. Special Forces sergeant said.

The clannish instincts of the montagnards don't help the situation any. But if they're ever going to make it as a nation, the Vietnamese are going to have to pay more attention to the minority they still too often refer to privately as "savages."

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